Elsewhere & Back. New & Selected Poems. Mairi MacInnes, Bloodaxe Books. £5.95

Kissing the Night. Christine McNeill, Bloodaxe Books. £5.95

Sunset Grill. Anne Rouse, Bloodaxe Books. £5.95

Gathering Strange Fruit

Valentina Bold

A sense of displacement informs these books, all by immigrants. Mairi MacInnes was raised in County Durham, spent twenty six years in America, and now lives in York. Christine McNeill lives in Cromer but was born in Vienna. Anne Rouse is an American writer who stays in Islington.

Elsewhere & Back combines poems from previous volumes – *The House on Ridge Road* (1988), *Herring, Oatmeal, Milk & Salt* (1982) – with new pieces. Part I, 'Here', deals with local continuities and changes, noted with the outsider's awareness of incongruity. On a sinister note, in 'Soft Fruit', 'atrocious' bends, 'a legacy of medievil/Danish land tenure', cause cars to crash. Echoing the Allan Lewis song 'Strange Fruit', the dead are compared to 'two ripe gooseberries hanging'. Rev. J.C. Atkinson (1814-1900) mourns the great spotted woodpecker in 'Forty Years in a Moorland Parish':

> What with shooting, the person writes,
> And felling of trees, 'the visits to the wood
> Of those harmless interesting beautiful
> birds became strangely like angels'.

Paradoxically (given his delightful image) Atkinson went shooting, contributing to this ecological devastation.

Past and present, real and imagined landscapes, are contrasted in Part II, 'There and Then'. 'Destruction on the Delaware-Raritan Canal, 1984-1986' draws on the *Iliadic* image of a river full of the dead: 'the land must have looked pretty much like this – tree stumps,/mud, oblivious runner'. The American dream of a home behind a white picket-fence is undermined by 'The House on the Ridge Road'. This fourteen part sequence fantasises about a derelict house in New England. Its orchard provides a unifying image; MacInnes describes a homely scene round an apple log fire. However, the owner was a brutal mercenary. Even his bees were 'bombers/his humming honey droppers'. This incomer, 'wanted to live for ever/in the douce haven of the orchard'. Instead he faced decay:

> A rush of dead children.
> The father furious in the orchard
> flailing the blossom,
> killing the sacred bees.

Alternative interpretations are provided, though. The widow recalls her husband's kiss, 'a bit rough like a Russet,/a bit smooth like a Red Delicious'.

Perceptual 'Gulfs' are explored in the final section For instance, in 'Welcome to Medocino' tourists, despite themselves, find 'The sea becomes their spokesman'. Soon, 'They're at home here ... /the packaging peeled from the rest of the world'. They do not appreciate its threat:

> The sea grumbles far away, the sea devoid of honour
> as it is, gobbling, dangerous, cold, for ever
> missing something, it doesn't know what ...
> .
> It only imagines it is hungry,
> full as it must be with continent wolfed.
> The comforter, then, is revealed as a predator.

Where MacInnes probes, McNeill is suggestive. *Kissing the Night* includes a variety of reminiscences, many relating to the fraught Austrian past. Born in 1953, McNeill draws on the previous generations's wartime experiences, investing them with distressing immediacy. McNeill's work, like Rouse's, appeared in Carol Rumens's *New Women Poets* (also from Bloodaxe Books). 'Geography Lesson', like Romens's poem of the same title, equates paper and living continents; McNeill implies collective guilt as a teacher rubs out a blackboard sketch of Germany. Disconcertingly, in 'Braunau, Hitler's Birthplace', a child stamping symbolises sustained militarism.

Intimate relatioships are portrayed ironically. A mother takes responsibility for her offspring's writing in "My Daughter": 'I have always taken care that she could/Spell the longest word in the language'. However, her trust is betrayed. Later the daughter becomes 'Enfant terrible' and:

> Named us openly in her literature, even her father, who, Nazi sympathiser per se, had suffered a heart attack under a picture of the Virgin Mary.

One is reminded of Larkin's family associations with fascism. Like Larkin, McNeill is capable of greatly compressed emotion; her 'Viennese Remembrance' recalls 'Dublinesque'.

McNeill testifies to human resilience. 'Danube' features a grandmother travelling 'upstream, face downwards' in 1942, passing soldiers downstream 'with erect rifles'. Her survival technique was to think of "windows," she said. "Of watering cans./Of midday brilliance. Of withered flowers thriving" '. Such pieces leave the reader chilled. So too in 'Corpus Christi' the confirmation gift of a diamond ring – "See the fire?" – from mother to daughter is poignant:

> She said afterwards: 'If there is another war,
> you can put the ring in your pocket and run.
> You can sell it somewhere else and be safe'.
> My fingers chilled.
> I put on my white gloves.

There is a wonderful symmetry to this poem. Years later, the daughter gives her mother a crystal butterfly brooch:

> I say: 'It's a symbol of the soul.'
> She says she's too old to wear jewellery
> and points at a pair of black gloves.
> 'Still as new. After all these years.'
> I want to hug her, and run.

Dichotomies are apparent, as McNeill is attracted and repelled by elements in her cultural past. Her liminal position is a source of creative strength. A German teacher, McNeill is as sensitive to linguistic ambiguities as her visitor in 'Second Language'; confused by phonetic similarities between a kettle 'De-furrer' and 'der Fuhrer'. As is stated in 'La Luna': I don't want/ to lose this foreigness'.

Sunset Grill also explores 'foreigness'. Rouse is an ethnographic observer. She portrays xenophobia adeptly in 'England Nil', in which a group of football supporters in Germany chant: 'Who won the war,/Anyway? Who nuked Dresden'? 'A North London Planetary System' brings the gods up to date in a modern city: 'Venus *on Holloway Road*' in 'blonde provincial mac'; 'Saturn *at Hornsey Road*' is 'on his portable at the Ouzo cafe'. A seedier version, then, of similar material to MacDiarmid's 'Bonnie Broukit Bairn'.

Technical facility is demonstrated in pieces like 'Miss North Crawley' of 1971, a cautionary tale. A beauty queen, Viv, is murdered, dumped in a field outside Crawley. The corpse is described with compassionate control:

> year on year,
> The drifts of her hair
> And her small perfect teeth
> Bleach in the air.

Rouse's finest work has a clinical precision. Perhaps this reflects her nursing background, featured in 'Round'. Nurses were: 'Out until 4 o' clock dancing, they're/Back on the ward at half-seven'. This is both medical round and roundelay; the chorus, with variations, *'I can't get up no'*.

The second half of *Sunset Grill* is mainly set in America; the poet is liveliest here. 'Virginian Arcady' introduces her muse, 'taller than a man', rising from a creek: 'She talked low, reproachful, pretty:' Said I don't love her enough'. The title poem vividly recreates an institution: 'EATS blinks red onto the parking lot'. 'Springfield, Virginia' describes how:

> Along the wooded road lightning bugs flared
> Like drunks with matches, seeing their way home,
> And whippergills nagged the sleeper
> Until a dawn as pink and blue as litmus paper.

There is an engaging self-confidence about Rouse, though heroes appear on occasion. 'Memo to Auden' opens vigourously: 'Wystan, you got off to a wrong start/Being neither Catholic nor tubercular'. Rouse ends the poem, and book, provocatively:

> P.S. Myself I have too much to learn
> Of voice and sense. You used this metre,
> Don Juan too, but in our day
> It's not exactly a world-beater.
> Still, "subtle" can mean convoluted
> And for our little chat, it suited.

Together, these three writers deserve wholehearted recommendation: MacInnes for her elegiac qualities, McNeill for her understated power; Rouse for stylistic versatility.